

The Book of Revelation

Lesson 6: The Seven Seals Opened -- Revelation 6:1-17

The scroll is in the right hand of the One who reigns. In the chapter before this, all of heaven held its breath because no one could be found worthy to open it, until a slain Lamb stepped forward and took the scroll from the hand of God. Now He begins to break the seals, one by one, and as each seal snaps open, history itself unfolds before John's eyes. Notice who is doing the opening. Not Caesar. Not the dragon. Not the blind grind of chance. The Lamb who was slain holds the future, and nothing happens in the world until He says so.

The first four seals release four riders, and they gallop into a world we recognize instantly. A conqueror bent on conquest. A red horse that takes peace from the earth so that men slaughter one another. A black horse of famine, with bread weighed out by the day and a voice counting coins. And a pale horse, sickly green, whose rider is named Death, with the grave following close behind. You have seen these riders. They ride through every century, through the evening news, through the cancer ward and the war zone and the empty pantry. This is the world as it actually is, fallen, restless, and dangerous.

But do not miss the small, controlling word that governs all four: each rider is given something, given a crown, given a sword, given authority over a fourth of the earth. They do not seize their power. They receive it, on a leash held in heaven. The horsemen are not proof that God has lost control. They are proof that even conquest and war and famine and death ride only as far as the Lamb permits, and no farther. A rebellious world reaps the bitter harvest of its rebellion, yet the harvest is measured.

Then the fifth seal lifts the floor of heaven, and we hear the voices of the martyrs under the altar, crying out the oldest prayer of the suffering church: How long? And the sixth seal tears the sky like a scroll, until kings and slaves alike scramble for the rocks and beg the mountains to fall on them, because the great day of wrath has come. This chapter was written to comfort a frightened, persecuted church, and it comforts us still. The riders are real, the grief is real, the waiting is real, but the Lamb holds the scroll, your tears are counted, and the last word belongs to Him.

Group Discussion: When you look honestly at the violence, hunger, sickness, and death loose in the world, where do you tend to locate God in that picture, distant and overwhelmed, or sovereign and purposeful, and how would it change the way you face the news if you truly believed the Lamb was the one opening every seal?

Personal Reflection: The martyrs cry out, How long? Where in your own life right now are you waiting on God for vindication or relief, and what would it look like to bring that honest cry to Him while still trusting His timing?

Read Revelation 6:1-17

Study Questions

1. Who opens the seals in this chapter (6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12), and why does it matter for the whole vision that it is the slain Lamb, and not Caesar or the dragon, who controls the unrolling of history? Connect this to Revelation 5:5–7 and the picture of Christ reigning now at God's right hand (Acts 2:36; Ephesians 1:20–22).
2. The four horsemen show us a world marked by conquest, war, famine, and death. Which of these riders feels most present in your own life or in the lives of those you love right now, and how does it steady you to know that even this rider was 'given' his authority and rides only on the Lamb's permission (6:2, 4, 8)?
3. Look carefully at the language of each rider: a crown 'was given' to the first (6:2), the second 'was permitted to take peace' (6:4), the fourth was given authority 'over a fourth of the earth' (6:8). What do these passive verbs and limited measures teach us about God's sovereignty over the troubles of a fallen world, and how does this guard us against thinking history has slipped out of His hands?
4. Famine, when bread is weighed out by the day and a worker's wage barely buys a meal (6:5–6), exposes how thin our security really is. What are you tempted to trust in for your sense of safety, and how does this passage press you to anchor your hope in the Lamb rather than in comfortable circumstances?

5. The pale rider is named Death, and Hades follows behind him (6:8). How does the rest of the New Testament reframe death for the Christian (1 Corinthians 15:54–57; Revelation 1:18, where Christ holds ‘the keys of Death and Hades’), and why does the Lamb’s authority over this final rider rob death of its power to terrify believers?
6. Death rides openly through this chapter, yet for the one who is in Christ it has become a defeated enemy. How does living in the daily awareness that Christ holds the keys of death change the way you spend your time, hold your possessions, and love the people around you?
7. Read the fifth seal closely (6:9–11). What are the martyrs asking when they cry, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood?’ and what does God’s answer, that they should rest ‘until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete,’ reveal about why He delays final judgment (compare 2 Peter 3:9)?
8. The martyrs are given white robes and told to ‘rest a little longer.’ When God’s timing feels unbearably slow, how do you typically respond, with bitterness, with numbness, or with trusting rest, and what would it look like this week to wait on the Lord the way these saints are taught to wait?

9. The popular view treats these seals as a straight-line countdown to a future seven-year tribulation, each rider a headline yet to come. But Revelation tells the same story over and over from different angles, replaying the one age-long war between Christ's two comings (this is recapitulation). Working through 6:1–17, make the case that the seals picture God's recurring judgments and care across the whole church age, climaxing in the final day of wrath at the sixth seal (6:12–17), rather than a literal future timetable to be matched to modern wars or nations. Why does it matter, pastorally and doctrinally, that we read this symbolically and not as a calendar (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7)?

10. Look back across the entire chapter, the riders given their leash, the martyrs given their rest, the rebellious given over to terror on the great day. Name one specific way the Lamb who opens the seals is forming you through this passage, whether toward steadier trust in His control, more honest crying out in your waiting, or deeper readiness for the day of His wrath and reward.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Zechariah 1:8–11, the colored horses patrolling the earth at God's command; Matthew 24:6–8, wars, famines, and earthquakes as the ongoing birth pains of this age, not the end itself; 2 Peter 3:9–13, the Lord patient and not slow, delaying judgment so that more may repent; Habakkuk 1:2–4, the prophet's own 'how long?' cry against injustice; Romans 8:35–39, no sword or famine or death can separate us from the love of Christ.

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